

# Knowing Duxbury's Roots

## The Father of Duxbury - Myles Standish

By Mary McKenzie  
Clipper Reporter

*Editor's note: It is said that you cannot understand the present until you know your past. If that true, an exploration into Duxbury's roots would start with the Mayflower. Myles Standish is one of the most well-known of Duxbury's first English settlers and did much to make the Plymouth Colony survive and thrive. In a series on "Knowing Duxbury's Roots," we start with Myles Standish. Many thanks to the Drew Archives for access to documents on these early settlers.*

Myles Standish was born in 1584 arguably in Chorley, Lancashire, England, however, the early life the Pilgrim and soldier Myles Standish is not well known.

In fact, it's been argued for about 150 years where exactly he came from. In Standish's will, he left mentions of land he would have inherited if his father were the first son: properties in Ormskirk, Burscough, Mawdesley, Newburgh, Croston and the Isle of Man. There is a branch of the Standish family that owned a manor known as Duxbury Hall, but nothing conclusive exists to say he came from there. It is curious, though, that Myles Standish was one of the first families to come to Duxbury from the Plymouth Colony and that there is a branch of Standishes who own a Duxbury Hall. The town of Chorley believes that Standish indeed did come from Duxbury Hall, which once the town made into a park but is now a golf course.

Another school of thought is that Standish is from the Manx family in Isle of Man. There seems to be connections to both Lancashire and Isle of Man, judging by family land holdings that were mentioned in his will to son Alexander.

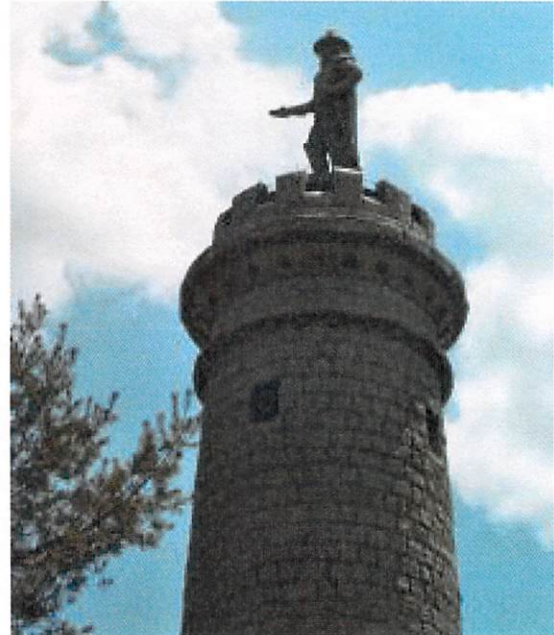
What is known is that Standish was in Holland in 1603 as a British soldier. But it is unknown if he was in the British military or a mercenary, which historian Nathan Philbrick theorized may have been the case. It is believed he fought in the 1604 Siege of Sluis.

The reason to be in Holland as a British soldier was Queen Elizabeth I's decision to support protestant Holland in the Eighty Years War against Roman Catholic Spain. She sent troops to help Holland protect itself.

Historian Justin Winsor wrote that Standish received a lieutenant's commission in the English Army and then was promoted to captain while in Holland. It is believed Standish served under Sir Horatio Vere, an English general who recruited in Lancashire and Isle of Man and led the English troops when Standish was in Holland.

The Twelve Years Truce put a hold on the Eighty Years War from 1609-1621, in the years while Standish was there. He married Rose Handley in 1618 and was living in the town of Leiden with her. He went by the title of "Captain" at the time and was well-known and liked by the people we now call Pilgrims.

As an indicator of the financial situation and dispositions of the folks who came over on the Mayflower, some accounts say that the group had initially approached famous explorer Captain John



The top of the Myles Standish Monument in Duxbury.

Photo by Aaron Carr

is

So

of

Smith (of Jamestown fame) for the role, and decided that he was too expensive and due to his fame and his ego, some thought he would be a poor choice.

So Standish may have been a second choice, but he was chosen because these future Pilgrims knew him and liked what they knew. For all of his life after taking on this role, he was considered very successful, although his means of getting things done for protection of the English settlers was questioned and often considered brutal; he was always looked upon as a strong leader and very successful in his role as military commander of Plymouth Colony.

While much of his life in Europe is unclear, what is known in his adult life from the time he joined the Pilgrims is extraordinary.

What might be assumed is that Standish was also part of the separatist church that roughly half the Pilgrims belonged to, but there is no evidence that he ever joined the church.

“Half of the pilgrims were religious separatists, the other half were people like John Alden, who were not coming for any religious motivation, but rather to find a new and possibly better life,” noted archivist Carolyn Ravenscroft, who works at the Drew Archives for Duxbury Rural and Historical Society. “Not all pilgrims were Separatists. There were two distinct groups among those in disagreement with the English Church at that time, those who believed you could purify the English Church and then separatists who believed they simply needed to cut away from it entirely, hence moving to Holland and then sailing off for the New World.”

On July 22, 1620, that first group of English dissenters to Massachusetts got on board the Speedwell in Holland, headed for England. The Speedwell was meant to accompany the other ship to be hired in England, which turned out to be the Mayflower. The Speedwell had much structural damage from the trip to Southampton England from Holland (there were plenty of leaks in the boat) and it caused delays at port. Both boats were able to leave the port on August 5. The Speedwell wound up returning to England as it took on more water on the trip. The over two-month trek for 102 passengers and 30 crew members enjoyed calm seas in the first month but in September wind and choppy seas and the ship suffered leaks. Two people died during this time.

Landing here in Plymouth Bay in 1620, the Pilgrims were not well-funded, not exactly sure where they were going (they had aimed for Northern Virginia and wound up in Massachusetts) and short on supplies by the time they got here. This rough state of affairs is in direct opposition to the Puritan Great Migration of 1630 from England, which founded the city of Boston 30 miles up from the Plymouth Colony.

“It is often thought that the Pilgrims founded Boston, but it really came from this mass movement to the New World by many well-educated professionals – clergymen, doctors, lawyers and teachers who knew where they were going and were well-funded,” Ravenscroft noted.

When the Mayflower’s crew first spotted land on November 9 and headed towards what is now called Provincetown, MA, they realized before getting near land that they had gone off course and were going to need to head south. But the weather and the waves were not allowing them to head to the intended target of Virginia. They tried again but they eventually decided that the unyielding stormy seas, the state of the boat and their lack of supplies (including wood and beer) made setting up where they were a much more logical and safe option. They anchored on November 11.

According to historical accounts, after the famous Mayflower Compact, the initial legal document for the colony, was drawn up and signed by 41 members of the party, of which Standish was one, Standish and a group of 16 men from the Mayflower went out to explore the northern portion of Cape Cod on November 15 of 1620.

It was now that they were on land that Standish quickly gained a reputation for military skill and bravery among the Puritans.

On December 11, 18 settlers explored the cape by boat. When they camped at night (using branches as makeshift cover), they were attacked one night by 30 Native Americans. Dubbed the “first encounter,” it took place in what is now Eastham. The settlers initially panicked and grabbed their muskets, but Standish asked them to keep their heads and they did. The incident incurred no violence.

The colonists decided on Plymouth Bay after completing this further exploration. In late December, 1620, the group set up settlement in Plymouth and Standish advised on a small fort with a cannon and layout of the houses for maximum defensibility.

Trouble came first from illness, dwindling food supplies and cold, not from unknown aggressors. During that first winter, Standish became known for kindness and selflessness when things got awful the first winter the Pilgrims spent in Plymouth, as he tended to the sick and the dying. He is one of the few who did not get horribly sick that first winter.

Half of the people who made the Mayflower trek did not see the spring of 1621 in Plymouth. One of those victims of hunger and disease was Standish's wife, Rose.

Rose Standish's death and Myles' search for a new spouse, were the inspiration for writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's fictional account "The Courtship of Myles Standish." Another victim of that horrible winter was the future governor of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford, who survived and became a lifelong friend of Myles Standish. The two were known as opposites – with Standish's temper well-known and Bradford, a careful quiet leader by nature.

"A rare example and worthy to be remembered," wrote William Bradford about Myles Standish and Elder William Brewster's efforts to help the sick and dying.

Next week, part two looks at Myles Standish's role in the New World and in Duxbury.

References: Courtesy of the Drew Archives Library; Cape Cod Seashores Guide; articles from Duxbury Clipper; Steve Rasmussen of Coven Oldenwilde on Merrymount and Thomas Morton; Thomas Morton, "The New English Canaan"; The Weymouth Historical Society; Nathaniel Philbrick "Mayflower: A Story of Community, Courage and War"; Justin Winsor, "History of the Town of Duxbury"; Jenks, Tudor, "Captain Myles Standish"; Leach Frances, "Notes on the Name Duxbury"; "The Duxbury Book" Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, Browne, Patrick and Forgit, Norman, "Duxbury, Past and Present," the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society; Goodwin, John, "The Pilgrim Republic: An Historical Review of the Colony of New Plymouth."